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ABSTRACT

This report contends that public events are effective ways for community colleges to provide a venue in which the burgeoning population of immigrant Americans may have a voice. The ten successful goals to successful public-event planning are: (1) determining goals; (2) selecting a date; (3) reserving facilities; (4) creating a student planning committee; (5) selecting a theme; (6) creating a timetable; (7) determining a budget; (8) publicizing the event; (9) enjoying the event itself; and (10) giving credit to contributors. This paper presents a plan for successful development of public events, including student plays, student speakers, student science fairs, student multi-media projects, student art exhibits, student story-telling, student forums, student inductions, student recognition ceremonies, or any event that features students. The author argues that virtually every new American in attendance will bring others to the event who will see their student modeling the use of a public forum as a means of expression. Step one should be considered in light of the goals of the college. Step two requires planning well in advance, and consideration of the schedules of students, faculty, and staff, as well as possible conflicts with other events. (Author/NB)

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New Americans Among Us: Public Event Planning for Community Colleges

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Presented to the Community College Humanities Association Southern Division Conference

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Abstract

Eleven percent of the population of the United States reported foreign birth in the 2000 census. This burgeoning population of new Americans needs a voice in the American conversation, and community colleges have an obligation to provide a venue for that voice. Public events are effective ways for community colleges to do so. The ten steps to successful public-event planning are 1) determining goals; 2) selecting a date; 3) reserving facilities; 4) creating a student planning committee; 5) selecting a theme; 6) creating a timetable; 7) determining a budget; 8) publicizing the event; 9) enjoying the event itself; and 10) giving credit to those who contributed. Finally, criteria for assessment of the success of the event are offered.

New Americans Among Us: Public Event Planning for Community Colleges

The idea for linking the growing population of new Americans among us with public events at community colleges grew out of the dramatic shift in America's population revealed by the 2000 census. More than 31,000,000 people in this country reported foreign birth, about half of these born in Latin American countries (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000, *Profile*). This figure represents 11% of the population of the United States, the highest level since 1930 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). Moreover, of that 31,000,000, more than 13,000,000 entered the country between 1990 and 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000, *Profile*), and that number is projected to continue rising (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000, *Projections*). Undeniably, we have an increasingly dynamic multicultural community in America.

The immense effort and sacrifice immigrating exacts testify to a desire for more than mere presence in our culture, but also participation. New Americans want a voice in the American conversation. There is evidence for this assertion: The Center for Education Statistics reported that Hispanic-born parents are more involved in their children's education than non-Hispanic-born parents, being more likely to help with homework assignments and to attend general school meetings (Sable, 1998). CES also found that these same parents, however, are less likely to attend school events unrelated to curriculum (1998), such as extra-curricular activities, perhaps due to limited English or discomfort in the unstructured social contexts of an unfamiliar culture. Clearly, they want their children to participate in this culture in which they feel less than comfortable and see education as the way for that to happen. Perhaps symptomatic of discomfort is the irony that when their own native-born children reach us in higher education, they are more likely to drop out than their foreign-born counterparts (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999). It is fair to conclude that our new American students represent a

population desirous of a voice that it does not now have in the mainstream conversation of American culture. Carlyn Kohrs Campbell, the Distinguished Lecturer for the National Communication Association for 2001, comments on groups without voices: "There is an alternative rhetorical tradition that exists in the works of groups who are oppressed, exploited, or lack the usual sources of power. . . . These groups cannot speak in the usual venues nor can they use many of the strategies available to members of dominant groups" (2001, p. 4). My overarching claim is this: It is the job of community colleges to give new Americans a venue for their voices. By making a space from which they can speak, we enable them to enter into the "usual venues" of public American conversation. Community colleges can create such venues through the sponsorship of public events.

This paper presents a plan for successful planning of public events, including student plays, student speakers, student science fairs, student multi-media projects, student art exhibits, student story-telling, student forums, student inductions, student recognition ceremonies—any event that features students. Virtually every new American in attendance will bring others to the event who will see their student modeling the use of a public forum as a means of expression—one "usual venue" of the public American conversation. What follows are ten steps to public-event planning for community colleges designed to take the sweat out of the event-planning process.

Step One

Determine goals for your event. Do this first, bearing in mind that your event ought to be justified in terms of the goals of your college. Keep the following questions and considerations in mind:

- What institutional, divisional, or departmental goals could the event serve? If you identify specific institutional goals to link with event, you may be able to mirror some of their wording. Your superiors will be glad to able to use your event to demonstrate that the goals they have adopted have been met.
- What student population do you want to feature? If you decide to feature a certain segment of your student body, let this be reflected in one or more of your goals.
- Write practical goals. Limit yourself to not more than three or four simple, clear goals worded in a way that links them to broader institutional goals. Be certain that your goals are realistic and do not exceed your ability to achieve them.
- When it's over, demonstrate how your event achieved its goals. You must be prepared to do this clearly and in writing.

Examples of goals:

1. To give students a public forum for their voices
2. To enrich the college experience for students
3. To welcome community members to the college

(Note: If you plan to feature a specific cultural segment of your community, rewrite this goal and insert it. Example: To welcome members of the Hispanic community to the college)

Step Two

Select a date months in advance.

- Consider your own schedule.

- Consider students' schedules. For example, at Horry-Georgetown Technical College, many students work in the hotels and restaurants of Myrtle Beach, where weekend work schedules tend to be heaviest.
- Consider the schedules of faculty, staff, and administrators whom you want to attend. You will want key members of your administration to be able to attend. During certain times of the year, administrators may be especially busy with tasks that recur at predictable times, such as graduation applications.
- Consider possible conflicts with other events, in both your college and the surrounding community.
- Have the date added to your college's comprehensive calendar of events.

Step Three

Reserve facilities. Do this as far in advance of your event as possible.

- Complete all necessary forms. But completion of forms is not enough, as detailed below.
- Find out who is responsible for each phase of operation in the facility you want to use. You should know who sets up the furniture, who takes care of the sound system, and who has a key to the building.
- Make personal contact. Go in person! Do this at the time you make the reservation and again as the date nears. You will be building an interpersonal relationship with people who can help when problems arise. If you show up in a last-minute panic, you will be recognized, and the misunderstanding will be better received.
- Keep records of telephone contacts and correspondence.

Step Four

Set up a student planning committee. You need student ownership of the event, making this step the most important of all. Your committee will act as host for the event.

- Talk it up. Start the talking process with your students early. Through talk, they will build the event symbolically, and from that symbolic construction the real event will emerge.
    - Always speak as if the event were a "done deal." This means conveying complete confidence in the students and in the event. Use the word *when* and not *if* when discussing the event with them.
    - Provide generous incentives for students. Students who participate will expect rewards, and, since your event will serve educational goals, rewards of an academic nature are justified. You will find academic rewards much more enticing than door prizes. Don't waste your time looking for donors among business owners in your area.
- Meet with students starting weeks in advance. Your student planning committee should meet several times before the event.
    - Have an agenda for committee meetings, but keep it loose. Some students will follow through; others will not. Don't express frustration with lack of follow-through in the presence of other students—this can undermine their confidence in the event.
    - Encourage brainstorming. Don't shut off the flow of ideas. Students will propose some elaborate schemes, the impracticality of which will

gradually become apparent to them, and wild ideas will fade away without your intervention.

- Let the student planning committee determine certain things. A feeling of student ownership will result if you relinquish some control. They should decide the following:
  - Event name: The name of the event may be a natural outgrowth of the theme of your event. Theme is discussed in step five.
  - Logo: The logo for your event serves as an important visual marker for the event.
  - Refreshments: Simple refreshments can be served for very little money, and the sharing of food and drink promotes feelings of community.
- Parcel out tasks. In a meeting of your student planning committee, have them volunteer for these tasks:
  - Ushers: Almost any event that features student performance will require the posting of ushers at exits, which is important for prevention of noisy distractions. One usher posted outside the door asks latecomers to wait until a break in the performance before entering, and one usher posted inside opens the door briefly to admit them when a break in the performance occurs. At a recent event, one student relished the role of usher when he asked the president of the college to wait outside the door.
  - Servers: For arranging and serving refreshments

- Photographer: The photographer should be a student whom you train to use the camera equipment ahead of time. Appoint a still photographer and a video photographer.
- Passing out programs: This chore does much to promote a feeling of hospitality on the part of the host class.
- Guest book: You can keep track of attendance so that you can assign extra credit to your students. Other faculty may send students to your event. They will want this information also. Give one of your helpers a clipboard.
- Emcee: Appoint a student for this chore. With a little coaching, a poised student can handle the rather complicated task of emceeing. Resist the temptation to emcee your own event, for it is crucial that you remain seated throughout the event. There is a subtle but powerful difference between an event emceed by a student and one emceed by you. If you step to the microphone, you step into the role of teacher and the audience your class, since most of them know you primarily in this role.

Step Five

Select a theme.

- Solicit input from students at your first meeting. The choice of a theme may be obvious, depending upon current events.
    - Election time? A debate of the issues can be lively as well as informative.

- Cultural observances? Cinco de Mayo, for instance, could be used as the theme of an event.
- Season of the year? Fall harvest time makes a unifying theme on a literal and metaphorical level.

- Carry out the theme.
  - Select a logo. Your students will willingly surf the Internet in search of a logo for the event. One group gave the banality of the smiley face new life as the logo for a creatively staged public speaking event.
    - Respect copyright. Teach your students about ownership of intellectual property by securing permission for the use of borrowed images they find on the Internet.
    - Give credit as appropriate to the sources of materials.
  - Use the theme throughout the event. You will find the samples at the end of this paper with examples of various logos that have been used in publicity, décor, and programs.

Step Six

Make a timetable. A timetable of tasks can be set up on a simple spreadsheet. In the example, tasks are set out on a weekly basis. One column is for the target week, the second for the task, and the third for the name of the person responsible. Place a checkmark in the last column to indicate that you have done a final follow-up.

Week of . . .	Task	Who's Responsible	✓ Checked

- List each task. Here are some examples of typical tasks:
    - Reservation of facilities
    - Publicity
    - Programs
    - Certificates
    - Invitations to key people (administrators, faculty, others)
    - Refreshments
    - Supplies: Be detailed here; even include the tape you may need to attach a sign to a door.
    - Audio-visual equipment
    - Permissions to be signed by students for use of their performances for educational purposes (see samples). You may want to use their pictures and recordings at a later time.

Step Seven

Determine your budget. A sample of a simple budget included in the samples at the end of this paper demonstrates the need for documentation.

- List all items and cost estimates.
- Keep costs reasonable. Even a fairly elaborate event can be done inexpensively if you are frugal. Here are some ways:
    - Print programs in-house. Black ink on stiff colored paper makes an acceptable program.
    - Use simple decorations. (But *do* decorate! Decorations send the message that this is a special event and are a source of pride for students.)

- Keep refreshments minimal. Drinks and cookies or salty snacks can be provided cheaply.

- Locate funding sources. Although funding sources may be limited, most budgets have the leeway to accommodate reasonable costs, especially given the potential benefits of your event.
  - Submit required documentation.
  - Follow up during the approval process to be sure your request has not been sidetracked.

Step Eight

Publicize your event. Good publicity brings in an audience and draws positive attention to you, enhancing your image with the administration of your institution. Be sure to use the sanctioned publicity channels that are in place at your college. Target both the internal audience of your college community and the external audience of the general public with your publicity efforts.

- Target: Internal audience
  - Ask yourself who inside the institution should know.
  - Tap into the customary channels, including catchy e-mail announcements *without attachments*.
  - Post colorful flyers at various locations around your campus. Also place copies on tables in the student canteen and, with permission, in the library for students to pick up. Keep supplies replenished.
  - In addition to your e-mail announcement, issue personal written invitations to key administrators and faculty members.

- Target: External audience
    - Ask yourself who outside the institution should know.
    - Reach this audience through newspapers, posted announcements at community centers, public access TV, and local TV news. Having a local reporter and camera person show up at your event can be a welcome surprise.
- Use your students to reach your target audiences. They can help with distribution of flyers. Encourage students to bring friends and family to the event.

Step Nine

The hour of your event has arrived. Enjoy it. Stay off the podium. Allow your students to truly own the event at this point by remaining in the background.

- Be pleasant and positive despite problems. Your event may go off without a hitch, but glitches often occur.
- Trust in others . . . but check! You will have delegated various tasks, and you should expect these to be performed reliably; however, a discreet and timely double-check should be made.
- Be ready to improvise. It is a truism of public events that the sound system will fail, the emcee will have laryngitis, the programs will not be printed on time, or the room will be set up incorrectly. No matter what goes wrong, take it with good humor, and remember that perfection is not the goal—participation is!
- Instruct one of your ushers to make an accurate count of attendance.

Step Ten

Give credit where credit is due. After the event, take time to acknowledge those who contributed, including you.

- Credit for you:
    - Report on the event to your immediate supervisor in a one-page, formal letter. Send copies up the chain of command to each administrator above her, all the way up to the president of your college.
    - The letter should describe the event, list its goals, explain how those goals were achieved, mention the attendance, and name those who helped.
    - The tone should be upbeat. This is not the place to complain about anyone who shirked his responsibilities or equipment that failed.
- Credit for others:
    - Write a formal letter to all others who helped. Write one personal letter for each, not a blanket letter naming them all.
    - Detail the person's contributions to the success of the event. You may want to acknowledge facilities coordinators, custodial staff, audio-visual staff, and the sponsoring department. Again, save negative criticism for another context.
    - Send a copy of the letter to each person's supervisor.

The reasons for doing this are two-fold: First, you will spread the kind of goodwill that ensures support for your next event; second, you will give those who helped evidence for their year-end performance evaluations.

How Did It Go?

As a final step, assess the success of your event. Assessment is crucial to your ability to report on your event and will help you plan future events. Since this guide was designed to take the sweat out of planning a public event, the acronym SWEAT is used as a marker for assessment criteria.

S – Success

Did your event create feelings of success, inclusion, and ownership in students? If it did, consider it a success. Your students will have memories of a productive educational experience in which they have played an integral part.

W: Welcome new people

Did your event bring people to the college who otherwise would not be there? Expect to be approached by family members of your students who say, "I didn't know this college was so nice," or "I've never been here before." These are the kinds of comments that you want to hear.

E: Enjoyable

Did you keep your event fun, informal, and light? Your students should feel warmth and satisfaction, not relief, when the event is over.

A: Attendance

Did you fill the room? Hint: Choose a small room. Nothing is more disappointing than a half-filled room, and even a respectable crowd will look small in a too-large auditorium. Better to use a small room and have your ushers dashing about for more chairs. It will add to the excitement and anticipation.

T: Time

Did you keep it brief? Always end early. *Show respect for the time of others by keeping your event to one hour or less.* Your audience will appreciate this and leave wanting more.

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